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Jennifer Gerdes
and Terri
Jefferson



How a Professional Learning Community Changed a Family Child Care Provider's Beliefs and Practices

When I first read the email regarding an opportunity to participate in a professional learning community, I felt like an overeager child in grade school, wildly waving my hand in hopes that the teacher would call my name. I knew nothing about learning communities. I just knew I desperately wanted to be part of one. When the learning community challenged me to think outside the box, there was this growing realization that maybe it was time to change my picture of what daily practice with children looks like. With each session this emerging epiphany took shape; I saw not only my role change but also the grand design of my interactions with children. [They] became bigger and bigger—encompassing every conversation, request, observation, and interaction.

THIS ARTICLE IS A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT TO SHARE THE POWER AND POSSIBILITIES OF A professional learning community to change the beliefs and practices of individuals working with young children. It is written from the perspectives of the learning community facilitator, Jennifer Gerdes, and one of the participants, Terri Jefferson—whose reflection opens the article. We describe multiple forms of professional development and share the structure, scope, and sequence of our learning community sessions, including Terri's experience and the resulting change in her beliefs and practices, in her own words.

What is a professional learning community?

Researchers have been interested in the outcomes of professional development for many years. The concept of professional development includes the expectation that participants engage in self-reflection and make changes in their philosophy, approach, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, or practices (Guskey 1986; Fleet & Patterson 2001; Sheridan et al. 2009). The most common professional development experience is specialized training that provides content through formats such as conferences, training sessions, presentations, and workshops (Sheridan et al. 2009). These experiences tend to be designed so that a participant attends the session, often with multiple others, and sits and listens to the “expert” discuss a given topic. For the most part, the participant is passively engaged in the learning experience. In contrast to conferences, presentations, and workshops, the professional learning community, a newer form of professional development, takes a more active approach.

The goal of the professional learning community is to foster professional learning in a setting in which the practitioner’s experience and expertise are utilized, the contributions of the learner are valued, and opportunities for reflection are many (Putnam & Borko 2000; Wood & Bennett 2000; Fleet & Patterson 2001; Richardson 2003; Sheridan et al. 2009). The use of the professional learning community as a format for professional development of the early childhood workforce is an emerging strategy (Wesley & Buisse 2006; Sheridan et al. 2009). Critical to the professional learning community design are the facilitator’s and the participants’ active participation, with all engaging fully in the learning experience (Sheridan et al. 2009).

The structure of our sessions

The intent of our learning community was to create an environment in which professional learning could take place through facilitated discussion about topics relevant to the family child care profession. In the state of Nebraska, the minimum requirement for child care licensure is 12 hours of professional development annually. The intent of the learning community was to meet this annual requirement while providing high-quality learning opportunities for the participants. These learning opportunities were designed to address the participants’ self-identified needs, be interactive, and provide

opportunities for discussion, reflection, and goal setting. The learning community met for one to two hours, twice a month, for three and a half months during the summer.

Group size and composition

For the sake of intimacy and the ability to discuss topics in depth, the group size of our learning community was limited to 10 participants. Participants were recruited by sending informational postcards announcing the professional learning community to 200 licensed family child care homes in Lancaster County, Nebraska, using a systematic sampling procedure. Thirteen expressed interest in participating, with six enrolling and completing the learning community experience. The women who participated were family child care providers with varying experience, levels of education, and backgrounds. One provider worked with infants, one with school-age children, and four worked with children of mixed ages, from 6 weeks to 12 years.

Session structure

The first task at the beginning of the biweekly sessions was to share progress toward the goals the participants had set during the previous session. Additionally, time was spent answering questions that had arisen between sessions or dealing with pressing issues the providers were facing. The second task was to discuss and analyze the topic for the day using the assigned reading or other provocation as a starting point. Each session ended with time for journal writing and personal reflection. Journal writing was used because the practice has been shown to facilitate a deeper understanding of experiences through assessing and articulating them; to foster thinking skills that actively engage the learner; and to support greater understanding of oneself as a teacher (Chitpin 2006; Pavlovich 2007). At the conclusion of each session, participants responded to a prompt that guided the journal reflections for that day. In addition, they wrote about their general thoughts, feelings, or insights from the session, set a goal for improvement, and described how they could enhance their teaching practice using the information from the session.

Scope and sequence

The learning community was intentionally designed to provide a thread of continuity in all interactions, allowing the group to travel back and forth in the investigation of

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Objectives and Descriptions of Learning Community Sessions

■ Session 1: Introduction

Objective: Introduce participants to the facilitator and each other, and explain the format of the learning community

Description: An icebreaker activity starts this session. Each participant shares a little bit about herself. Led by the facilitator, the group lists topics they want to learn about during the course.

Journal prompt: Why do I do what I do?

Assignment: Complete the My Story narrative.

Materials:

- Icebreaker activity materials
- Name tags
- Paper and markers
- Participant journals

■ Session 2: Relationship Building and Beliefs

Objective: Build relationships between the participants and have participants make connections between their childhood experiences and their current practices

Description: Using childhood photos, each participant shares favorite childhood memories. Participants also share reflections from their My Story narrative assignment. They make connections between childhood experiences and their current practices with young children. **Journal prompt:** What activities did you enjoy doing in your early childhood? How does this relate to what you do with children? **Assignment:** Read “Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins,” by Loris Malaguzzi (1994).

Materials:

- Childhood photographs
- My Story narrative
- Participant journals

■ Session 3: Examining Beliefs

Objective: Explore “Your Image of the Child” (see Edwards, n.d., for full activity) and how this image influences participants’ interactions with children

Description: During the session, participants complete the “Your Image of the Child” activity. Additionally, they share three reflections on the article:

(1) general comments, (2) a question that the article posed for them, and (3) something in the article that made them think in a new way. **Journal prompt:** What is your image of the child? How does this image relate to your everyday work with children?

Materials:

- “Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins”
- A variety of pictures of children
- Glue, markers, paper
- Participant journals

■ Session 4: Child Development

Objective: Gauge participants’ levels of understanding about developmental milestones and the developmental sequence

Description: The group moves age-by-age along the developmental continuum, identifying key developmental tasks at different stages. The facilitator then provides a handout summarizing developmental tasks and asks participants to review it to see if there is anything they would add. The group discusses ways to support the tasks in their work with children. **Journal prompt:** Why is it important to be aware of the developmental sequence? How does this awareness change what you are doing with children?

Materials:

- Butcher paper, tape, markers
- Handout listing child development milestones
- Participant journals

■ Session 5: Curriculum

Objective: Continue to explore developmental milestones and how to support them in the family child care environment, including selection of materials and daily schedule of activities

Description: Each participant shares her daily schedule, explaining the reasoning behind the selection of activities in her child care environment. Participants discuss materials, provision of the environment, and communicating curriculum to parents.

Journal prompt: How do you plan for each day and why do you choose the activities that you choose?

Materials:

- The developmental continuum from Session 4
- Providers’ daily schedules
- Participant journals

■ Session 6: Identifying Learning in Action

Objective: Support providers in their identification of learning in action and explore ways to communicate child development to parents

Description: The facilitator introduces the developmental wheel. Participants watch a short video clip of children in action, and at the end they each fill out a blank developmental wheel. Participants share what they saw the child learning and the developmental milestones in the video. This process repeats for two more videos. For one of the videos, the facilitator provides copies of state early learning guidelines. Participants use them to identify additional learning that occurred during the child interaction and include it on their wheels. **Journal prompt:** How did you feel doing this activity? What did you learn about yourself through this process?

Materials:

- 3 blank developmental wheels for each participant
- 3 short video clips (less than 3 minutes each) of children in action
- Copies of state early learning guidelines
- Participant journals

■ Session 7: Learning Community Closure

Objective: Provide closure to the learning community and discuss lingering questions or concerns

Description: To address the needs of the group, this session is more open ended and flexible. The facilitator summarizes each session and asks participants what they would like to talk more about. They discuss changes the participants have made in their practices or in their thinking about child growth and learning. **Journal prompt:** What have you learned and how have you grown during our time together?

Materials:

- Participant journals

ideas and the translation of the ideas into practice. While the scope and sequence were followed, we often revisited topics again and again throughout the 12 weeks of learning community sessions. Conversations were not limited to the topic of the day but rather included whatever the group needed at that time.

In the first session, participants shared their needs, what they hoped to gain from their participation, and desired outcomes. Those conversations shaped the content of the learning community sessions. As a result, our learning community focused on provider beliefs about children and learning, child development principles, and curriculum implementation. We spent the first two sessions discussing beliefs about children and how they learn, and considering how the personal experiences of the provider might influence her interactions with children. During the third and fourth sessions we discussed child development milestones and ways to identify child development from birth through age 12. The final three sessions focused on using beliefs and child development principles to inform curriculum development and implementation in the family child care setting. (See “Objectives and Descriptions of Learning Community Sessions.”)

Facilitating the learning community sessions

In contrast to the facilitator’s role in other professional development settings, such as workshops and conferences, the facilitator of a learning community is seen as a supporter of, and guide to, learning in partnership with the practitioners rather than an expert who provides the answers (Hawkey 1997; Putnam & Borko 2000; Fleet & Patterson 2001). A skilled facilitator is a key element in the success of the learning community design. Based on responses from participants in our learning community, we identified three skills that are important for a learning community facilitator to have. The first is the ability to plant the seed of learning and tend the learning without being overpowering and controlling. One participant stated,

I saw [the facilitator] as someone who would plant some ideas and then let us run with them. She would let us toss around the ideas and then sometimes jump in. If she felt that maybe we were not quite “getting” a particular idea, she would guide us a little bit.

The second key to effective facilitation is having a balance between presenting necessary content and factual

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Terri Jefferson's Story

In the year that has passed since I was involved in the professional learning community, I have continued to feel strongly that this style of learning should have a place in the in-service arena. In my 20-plus years as a home child care provider, I was starting to feel ineffective, isolated, stagnant, and desperately in need of a change. I did not want a career change, but a change in the way I was doing things. Over the years I have received numerous hours of education and training from evening in-service and all-day conferences to taking classes in early childhood development. It wasn't for lack of resources that I pursued this opportunity; rather, it was a desire to breathe new life into something that had become too hard.

First impressions

Participation in the learning community was completely different from any other professional development opportunity I had experienced. From our first session, it was obvious that we were not going to be scribbling notes fast and furiously as our presenter spewed knowledge. Though our facilitator had the experience and education, and could have filled the hours with facts, information, and strategies, she assumed the role of "expert guide."

I've been in settings where participants quickly hijack the engineer, and soon we are on a runaway train of caregivers voicing their frustrations and dilemmas, with little hope of getting back on track. The genius of a learning community format is that members are given a platform for expressing their views—they are validated, yet the facilitator keeps a tight enough hold on the reins so that the sessions remain positive.

A re-energizing, life-changing experience

There is something very affirming when people of similar professions share stories and everyone in the group nods in agreement, knowing exactly what it feels like. Throughout these discussions, our facilitator kept us focused, made prompts, and challenged us to think outside the box. As we would think out loud, one remark would bring enlightenment to someone else, and the energy of these aha moments would flow through the room. After each session, I left the group feeling encouraged, revitalized, inspired.

Accountability was a major benefit of this method of training. I've left more than one workshop feeling on top of the world; but with no one to answer to, my zeal was soon lost when the rubber hit the road. In the professional learning community, we came back to our group to revisit topics from session to session, and I was able to ask my questions and follow up with the group. This kept me on task with my own goals. Shared experiences, time for reflection, goal setting, and follow-up made

the learning process much more concrete. I never left a session wondering how I would apply the information to my particular situation. In fact, I was eager for the next day's work so I could immediately try out new ideas and strategies.

At the risk of sounding dramatic, I would say that this learning experience has been life changing. I have remained in the child care profession because I am passionate about the role we, as providers, play in the development of young children; but when I couldn't get excited about my passion, it was obvious something was wrong. The facilitator and members of the learning community were able to walk through situations with me, get to the bottom of the pile, and uncover the underlying issues. I knew something profound had happened when one morning I realized that I was actually looking forward to spending my day with eight children, ages 3 and younger!

How I changed my practice

One of the tools I took from the professional learning community experience is the value of being present, really present, with the children. It is undoubtedly the most natural way to pass on information. In a conversation I had with my daughter when she was about 3 years old, she said, "Listen to this, Mommy. Listen to this!" I replied, "I am listening." Her answer: "But I want you to listen with your eyes." Clearly she was aware that she was not getting much of my attention. Not until 30 years later, in the learning community, did I challenge myself to make that change in my work. Now I'm learning to stop, look, listen, and give specific feedback regarding the accomplishments of my charges, confirming my caring and interest in them. . . . They seem to thrive in the attentive atmosphere.

Another daily practice I've adopted is deregulating the scheduled day. I am a firm believer in schedules, but my schedules were too firm. Children are born to learn, and we don't have to be limited by schedules and routines to teach. Freedom from the tyrannical clock has created a much more relaxed environment. There is a schedule in place, but I rule it rather than it ruling me. I am learning to enjoy the children more, and to live with them and guide them, not merely be "in charge" of them.

Living in the present and seizing the moment are invaluable teaching tools; it is not necessary to use a worksheet to "teach" or measure understanding. We sing a song about the weather while pointing to the weather chart—or better yet, we sing and talk about the weather while playing outside. I've learned that feeling the wind blow our hair is more meaningful than watching the trees move through the picture window.

information and providing opportunities for participants to problem solve and discover answers themselves. The family child care providers in this learning community appreciated that the redirection and content infusion were necessary, but because these components were balanced with the group's inquiry, they felt ownership of their learning. In the words of one participant,

I didn't feel like [the facilitator] just flat out gave us the answers. You know, it was like how one thought creates another thought, and people just feed off of each other, and pretty soon we sort of figure it out. And I felt like she was kind of guiding us that way. . . . She was excellent in that role, as far as not giving us the answers but helping us discover the answers.

Participants appreciated the autonomy provided through the learning community design, and the opportunity to use their experience and expertise to solve problems.

The third key to effective facilitation is approaching the role as a collaborative partner rather than an all-knowing expert who needs to "fix" the participants. This is a philosophical orientation to professional development that not everyone holds but is clearly needed in the learning community setting. As one participant stated,

I know we all liked [the facilitator] because we would walk out and say that [she] didn't make us feel "less than," because she included interaction [and] asked us questions. She didn't just stand there. She sat at our eye level, and she didn't make me feel "less than" because she is more educated.

In the end, our learning community's activities, reflections, and facilitation impacted the thinking and behaviors of the participants in many ways (Gerdes 2012). One example of this impact is Terri's story of her experience in the professional learning community and the powerful, lasting changes in her beliefs and practices. (See "Terri Jefferson's Story.")

Conclusion

Being part of the learning community experience influenced growth in participants' use of developmentally appropriate practices as well as increasing the providers' reflection skills and awareness of their practices. This professional development experience has had lasting effects, as evidenced by the Terri story. While not without challenges—particularly in timing (the learning community took place in the summer months) and meeting the diverse needs of individuals with varying degrees of experience and education—the learning community was meaningful for all participants. Our experience confirms what Schreiber, Moss, and Staab (2007, 169–70) state,

We have found that a more important outcome of professional learning [than acquiring effective

teaching skills and techniques] might be to foster an increased comfort with the state of genuine doubt and the abductive reasoning process that allows teachers to use that discomfort to drive sophisticated and deeply personal learning agendas of their own. We have also come to believe that when communities are formed to confront beliefs and provide a forum for challenging and examining them, they can influence teachers and teaching in powerful ways.

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